

The forgotten art of play

| Print |

Written by Dr John Irvine | 06 October 2011

Child psychologist Dr John Irvine stresses that playtime is essential for kids (and adults) to developing fundamental life skills.

Dr John Evans in the magazine "Every Child" argues that "organised activities are replacing free and creative play in ways that should concern everyone interested in the growth and development of children". He argues that sport (like work) is controlled by adults so the children are deprived of opportunities to make decisions and to take responsibility for their own action. By contrast, in games children devise for themselves, they create the rules, choose the teams, and take responsibility for maintaining the momentum.

In a world that's harsher and faster, we may be forgetting how to play and are in danger of paying a huge price for that. Families have forgotten how to play with life, with their kids and with their own problems. Without play children are intellectually and socially impoverished and adults become permanent parents offering no fun and losing the energy to parent because their batteries are not being recharged.

For children, play is the essential ingredient to add SPICE to life:

- S – Skill building and coordination
- P – Problem solving and intellectual development
- I – Imagination and creativity
- C – Communication and social skills
- E – Ego development and self confidence.

Play, in effect, is their way of learning what no adult can teach them as their little minds try to come to terms with the scary, dare-y, and share-y demands of real life. Above all else they lose the capacity to learn to live with each other, to learn to play with their problems and to learn to enjoy creative lateral thinking and problem solving.

If children don't develop confidence in their ability to think creatively and to trust its messages then the consequences for the world are enormous – not only by denying individuals of a play escape from the world of woes and worries, but denying them the confidence and ability to find creative solutions for the ever increasing problems of mankind's continuing existence on this planet – AIDS, ozone, overpopulation, pollution and so on.

- For all humans, play releases endorphins and other chemicals needed to build up the immune system and battle the bugs, so without play we become a sicker society;
- For adults, play is an anti-stressor so with its demise comes more and more burnout, more and more of the stress-related disorders and the greater need for relaxation, stress management, leisure farms, alternate religions, escape into alcohol or other substances;
- For society, play is an integrating, generation-crossing device that transcends age, colour and religious differences. Without it society pays a high medical and social cost as the community fractures more as it loses its capacity to play together;
- For families, it's a cliché, but an ever so true one, that families who play together tend to stay together. If the everyday problems that arise in all families (such as disobedience, fighting, arguments, rudeness, laziness, temper tantrums and homework) can be handled with playful confidence, then they don't descend into domestic warfare.

Many parents say they don't know how or what to play, but that's the vey point; it's creative, there is no formula needed. All it requires is for any person of any age to enjoy those activities that provide fun, give scope to the imagination and offer opportunities to be shared with their kids.

The natural elements are a good start – sand, water, mud, leaves and wind; once it's underway kids get the message very



quickly that this is fun and fantasy time and will quickly join in.

Play is not just a four letter word. It's one of the most powerful forces available to build healthy families. And just remember, that whatever our age, we're never too old to enjoy our childhood.

Dr John Irvine is a consultant child psychologist at the READ clinic in Gosford. He is a guest speaker at the **Power of Play National Playgroup Conference in Melbourne from October 12–14.**